

SUPPLIES, SWORD ... AND SPITTLE

INTRODUCTION

Chapter 21 begins a section – which runs through to the end of the book – which recounts David's experiences as an outlaw, a fugitive hunted by the king, a man without a country.

We more or less concluded our last study with the comment that 'whether David appreciated it or not, he was not yet ready to be given the rule over the Lord's people. His character had yet to be formed. The gold of his faith had yet to be refined. And so, between him and his being made king by all Israel and Judah, lay many hard times'.

David had to learn – as we all do – that God uses difficulties to mould the characters of His saints and to make them better people. Charles Dickens began his *The Tale of Two Cities* with the words, 'It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, ...'. I have a hunch that, when David later looked back on his early years – on the years before he came to power as Israel's king – he would have described them in much the same way – although I guess he would have reversed Dickens' wording, to read, 'It was the worst of times, it was the best of times'.

For, though the years before David began his reign, were, in one sense, 'the worst of times' – though they were very difficult (and often downright dangerous) times for David, they were also the 'best of times'. For they were times when David learned to deal with a whole range of adverse circumstances – facing situations of great peril and uncertainty – situations of rejection and betrayal. They were times when David had occasion to rely upon God and to treasure His Word (as comes through clearly from the profoundly spiritual content of the psalms he wrote during this period). They were times when David learned obedience and submission to God's will – and to wait patiently for God's perfect timing. Who knows? – perhaps towards the end of his life David reflected on his many, chequered experiences, and observed that it wasn't when he was fleeing from Saul that he committed his greatest sins – of covetousness, adultery and murder – riding roughshod over at least three of the Ten Commandments!¹

Yes, they were undoubtedly 'the worst of times', but, in many ways, they were also 'the best of times'!

Robert Browning Hamilton once wrote, 'I walked a mile with pleasure; she chattered all the way; But left me none the wiser for all she had to say. I walked a mile with sorrow, and n'ere a word said she, but Oh the things I learned from her, when sorrow walked with me'.² I guess the day was to come when David would have signed up to that!

CHAPTER DIVISION

The obvious break in the chapter comes at the end of v.9 :

(a) In vv.1-9, David is with Ahimelech at Nob ('Then came David to Nob to Ahimelech', v.1)

(b) In vv.10-15, David is with Achish at Gath ('David ... went to Achish the king of Gath', v.10).

At both Nob and Gath, David resorted to deception to protect himself. (In chapter 20 it was Saul who had 'shamed' David, v.34; in chapter 21 David shamed himself - by his deceptions.)

Verses 1-2 David the deceiver - his 'secret mission'. 'Ahimelech was afraid', v.1

Verses 3-6 Any food? 'Under thine hand ... bread?', v.3. Only some special bread

Verse 7 The villain : 'A certain man ... there that day ... Doeg'

Verses 8-9 Any weapon? 'Under thine hand ... spear or sword?', v.8. Only one special sword

Verses 10-15 David the deceiver - his 'feigned madness'. 'David ... was ... afraid', v.12

Note the 'parallel' structure in vv.1-9 :

(a) David's first question, v.3 'Under thine hand ... bread?', v.3.

(b) Ahimelech's answer, v.4

(c) David's response, v.5

(a) David's second question, v.8 'Under thine hand ... spear or sword?', v.8.

(b) Ahimelech's answer, v.9a

(c) David's response, v.9b

EXPOSITION

Verses 1-2 David the deceiver - his 'secret mission'. 'Ahimelech was afraid', v.1

Verse 1. 'Then came David to Nob'. In the light of the confirmation David had received from Jonathan about Saul's settled intention to kill him, David knew that he had no option but to save his life by immediate flight. It was now inevitable that he would be a hunted man, whom not even the friendship of a Jonathan could protect. David knew that he must find some shelter and haven – and that quickly. And where better, he thought, than outside of Saul's domain altogether – indeed, with Saul's sworn enemies, the Philistines. But it was a considerable distance to Philistia and, in the circumstances, David's journey there might not be altogether free from danger. And so, in quest for some nourishment for his body, some weapons for his protection, and probably spiritual support and guidance,

David decided to make first for the Lord's tabernacle – then situated at Nob. Indeed, apart from any *spiritual* interest which Nob held for David, it would be difficult to account for his heading there first. Gath³ was situated about 50 miles south west of Saul's court and fortress at Gibeah, where David had left Jonathan. But Nob was situated about 2½ miles south east of Gibeah. (Nob was about 1½ miles northeast of Jerusalem.⁴)

The following facts point to the Lord's tabernacle, the central sanctuary of Israel, being then at Nob:

(a) Nob was 'the city of the priests', v.19;

(b) Ahimelech the high priest was there, along with 84 other priests, 22.18-19. The slaughter of the priests at Nob virtually annihilated the (then) legitimate priesthood, 1 Sam. 2.27-33; 3.11-14; 1 Kings 2.27.⁵

(d) Both the table of shewbread ('the bread of the Presence') and the high priest's ephod were there, vv.6, 9.

It seems that Shiloh, the earlier location of the tabernacle had been destroyed⁶ and that the tabernacle was subsequently relocated to Nob.⁷

It is possible, but by no means certain, that David went to Nob to obtain counsel of God by means of the ephod with its Urim and Thummim stones.⁸ Doeg later claimed that Ahimelech enquired of God for David, 22.10. And Ahimelech's response, 'Have I today begun to enquire of God for him', 22.15 (lit.), can be interpreted as meaning that Ahimelech had often enquired of God for David in the past.⁹ If that is correct, then David went first to Nob, in part at least, because it was his practice to go there to ask counsel of God when necessary.

But, whether that was so or not, it is highly likely that David wanted to *meet with God* there once more before he left the Lord's land for foreign soil. We pick up from his psalms something of David's love for God's house and dwelling; for example, 'I have loved the habitation of thy house, and the place where thine honour ('thy glory') dwelleth', Psa. 26.8; 'One thing I have desired of the Lord, that will I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord, and to enquire in His temple', Psa. 27.4. (Note the reference to 'enquiring' there.)¹⁰ He later made it clear that he dreaded the thought of leaving 'the inheritance of the Lord' and thereby exposing himself to the temptations of idol worship, 26.19.

We should perhaps note that Nob lay a little to the east of the road from Gibeah to Bethlehem – where Saul may well have headed in pursuit of David. (Remember that, on David's instructions, Jonathan had recently reminded Saul of David's close family connection with Bethlehem, 20.28.)

'To Ahimelech the priest'. Having found no sanctuary with the *prophet* (Samuel) or safety with the *prince* (Jonathan), David makes his way, initially at least, to the *priest* (Ahimelech).¹¹

'Ahimelech was afraid at the meeting of David'. Ahimelech knew that David was Saul's son-in-law and held a responsible position in Saul's kingdom, 22.14, but he clearly had heard nothing of the latest developments and of Saul's recent attempts on David's life.

Yet David's unexpected and unheralded arrival – with neither escort nor attendants – unnerved and alarmed him. Some time before, the elders of Bethlehem had trembled at Samuel's coming, precisely because they did not know the reason for it, 16.4. Ahimelech, similarly not knowing why David had come, was afraid - and asked what were, in effect, two fairly obvious questions.

'Why art thou alone, and no man with thee?' Although the two questions seem to be saying much the same thing, David chose – for his own reasons, as we will see – to answer them separately, v.2. Clearly, Ahimelech was no fool. David had been appointed 'the captain ('chief') over a thousand', 18.13. If therefore David was coming in his official capacity, as he may have a number of times before, then he should have his men with him.

Although David approached Ahimelech alone, clearly he did have 'young men' who had accompanied him from Gibeah – and were evidently stationed nearby – and with whom David intended to meet up again soon, v.2. Note too the words of Jesus, 'Have ye not read ... what David did ... How he went into the house of God, and did take and eat the shewbread, and gave also to them that were with him (presumably a little later)', Luke 6.3-4. These 'young men' were probably some of David's loyal friends at court who were prepared to forsake the court to be with him. Doubtless they later formed part of David's 'men' – the 400, and still later the 600.

Verse 2. 'The king hath commanded me a business, and hath said unto me, Let no man know any thing of the business'. David deliberately deceived Ahimelech. We aren't told why. On the one hand, his motive may have gone no higher than that of self-preservation – to protect himself. For, if Ahimelech's sympathies lay with Saul – or if Ahimelech feared Saul sufficiently – he might well have betrayed David to Saul. On the other hand, David may have answered Ahimelech as he did for Ahimelech's own sake. Perhaps David reasoned that if he didn't disclose to Ahimelech the real reason for his coming – namely that he was fleeing from Saul – then Ahimelech would not be implicated in his actions. If David's short stay at Nob ever became public knowledge, Ahimelech could then honestly claim that he knew nothing whatever of David's renegade status - which is, in fact, what he was able to claim later, 22.14-15. David's fabricated story may therefore have been an attempt to protect Ahimelech. If it was, as we will find in the next chapter, it failed abysmally.

'The king hath commanded me a business'. Might David's reference to 'the king' have been deliberately ambiguous? Did David have in mind, not Saul, but a *greater* King? We find later that David appears to have used deliberately ambiguous expressions to deceive Achish, king of Gath; 'David said to Achish, Surely thou shalt know what thy servant can do', 28.2, and 'David said unto Achish ... What hast thou found in thy servant ... that I may not go fight against the enemies of my lord the king?', 29.8. It is not impossible therefore that David pacified his conscience with the knowledge that, *in one sense at least*, what he said was true. But, whatever David may have said to himself, what he said to Ahimelech was intended to deceive him – and, in the only sense in which Ahimelech could have understood it, it was a lie. 'This was deception at best and a lie at worst'.¹² Indeed, David proceeded to elaborate on his lie by attributing false words to the king himself.

'Hath said to me, Let no man know anything of the business whereabouts I have commanded thee'. The king, so David's story went, had sent him out on a top-secret mission - which he was not a liberty to disclose even to

Ahimelech. By telling Ahimelech that he was not in fact alone but that he has hidden his men secretly nearby, David may have been hoping that his 'cloak and dagger' act would add weight to his explanation.

It is sad that the man who had fearlessly tackled the Philistine champion single-handed should now fear to speak the truth to Israel's high priest. But perhaps we ought not to find this so strange. Will not an Elijah, recently returned from his victory over 850 false prophets on Carmel, flee before a threat from a wicked woman, 1 Kings 19.1-3? Will not a Peter, who would unsheathe his sword against enormous odds in Gethsemane, quail before the question of 'one of the maid's of the high priest', Mark 14.66-70? I guess that we can sympathise with such men. Many of us would no doubt have done the same – or worse – in similar circumstances.

David would come to greatly regret the consequences of his actions and his deceit; 'David said unto Abiathar, I knew it that day, when Doeg the Edomite was there, that he would surely tell Saul: I have occasioned the death of all the persons of thy father's house', 1 Sam. 22.22.

Verses 3-6 Any food? 'Under thine hand ... bread?', v.3. Only some special bread

Verse 3. *'What is under thine hand? give me five loaves of bread in mine hand'*. David follows up his answer to Ahimelech's first question with a request. To ask for only 'five loaves' was in reality a very modest request. David had been asked by his father to take *ten* loaves to feed his *three* brothers in the valley of Elah; 'Take now for thy brethren an ephah of this parched corn, and these ten loaves, and run to the camp to thy brethren', 17.17, and our Lord spoke of *three* loaves as being required to feed just *one* unexpected visitor, 'Which of you shall have a friend, and shall go unto him at midnight, and say unto him, Friend, lend me three loaves; For a friend of mine in his journey is come to me, and I have nothing to set before him?' Luke 11.5-6.

Verse 4. *'There is no common bread under mine hand, but there is hallowed bread'*. 'Common bread' signifies ordinary bread, as opposed to that which was specially sanctified and dedicated for some sacred purpose. 'Hallowed bread' here refers to the 'shewbread' – 'the bread of the Presence' – of the tabernacle.

On entering the first compartment of the tabernacle, the 'holy place', the priests would see a table overlaid with gold on their right – the north side – opposite the golden lampstand.¹³ On this table there were always twelve loaves (or 'cakes') of shewbread, made of fine flour and sprinkled lightly with frankincense. The loaves were set in two rows of six each.¹⁴

The shewbread was always to be fresh, and so, once a week, the bread would be replaced, and the priests were authorised to eat the old bread; 'it shall be Aaron's and his sons'; and they shall eat it in the holy place', Lev. 24.9.¹⁵ Although this verse doesn't specifically state that only the priests were ever to eat the shewbread, it did establish plainly that the bread was something set apart and holy, not to be distributed casually.¹⁶

In the circumstances, Ahimelech was prepared to share with David the old shewbread, which had been taken from before the Lord in order for fresh hot bread to be put in its place. That is, Ahimelech's 'hallowed bread' was about to become David's 'daily bread'!

Ahimelech rightly understood that human need was more important than the observance of ritual and ceremony – for five chapters before Lev. 24.9, God had spelled out His law of love, 'Thou shalt not avenge, nor bear any grudge against the children of thy people, but *thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself*: I am the Lord', Lev. 19.18!

It is worth noting that, when the disciples of the Lord Jesus were criticized for eating corn on the Sabbath day – in violation of the tradition of the elders and the current rabbinical teaching – Jesus pointed the critical Pharisees to the example of Ahimelech and David, Matt. 12.1-8. The obvious point established by Jesus when vindicating the actions of Ahimelech and David in 1 Sam. 21 was that 'human need takes priority over ceremonial law'.¹⁷ That is, the priest was right to preserve David's life even at the expense of a ceremonial rule.¹⁸

Jesus drew His opponents' attention to the fact that it was David who ate of the 'hallowed bread', and yet David wasn't one of the priests. Why then did the Pharisees not find fault with David's action? Part of the answer, the Lord suggested, is that *who you are* makes all the difference. They didn't complain at David's eating of the sacred bread simply because he *was David* – soon to become the King of Israel. This put the whole matter in an entirely different light. And the same clearly held true in their eyes for the temple priests. They undoubtedly did 'work' on the Sabbath, but were not condemned for doing so – and that rightly – because they were priests. And so one of the reasons why Jesus didn't feel obliged to conform to the Pharisees' rules regarding the Sabbath was because of who he was – that He was the authoritative 'Lord of the Sabbath'. He was God's Messiah, the One appointed by God to rule universally as King. And so, if David could eat the sacred bread because of who he was, and if the priests could break the Sabbath because of who they were, then surely He and His followers were, if hungry (as David and his men were¹⁹), free to eat on the Sabbath because of who He was.

Indeed, the case of David and Ahimelech which Jesus cited may have been more directly relevant to the context of Matthew 12 than at first meets the eye. For v.6 of our chapter implies that this incident actually took place on a sabbath day, when the consecrated bread was being renewed and replaced with a fresh supply; 'every sabbath he (the high priest) shall set it in order before the Lord continually', Lev 24.8. In support of the incident in 1 Sam. 21.1-6 having taken place on a Sabbath day is the fact that, on any other day, there would have been no barrier to the priests at Nob preparing fresh ordinary bread for David's use. If this was the case, then both the precedents which Jesus cited (that of David eating shewbread and the priests working in the temple) had to do with seemingly 'unlawful' actions on the Sabbath day!

'If the young men have kept themselves at least from women'. If David's men had recently had sexual relations with women, that would have rendered them ceremonially unclean.²⁰ The same had held true from the very beginning of Israel's history; 'Moses went down from the mount unto the people, and sanctified the people; and they washed their clothes. And he said unto the people, Be ready against the third day: come not at your wives', Exod.

19.14-15. Ahimelech ruled that, if they were ceremonially unclean, they were temporarily unfit to partake of 'hallowed bread'.

Verse 5. *'Women have been kept from us about these three days, since I came out'*. David may have been careful to introduce the time-note of 'three days', because, if Ahimelech did happen to have contact with somebody with a little knowledge of Saul's court, this would have fitted well with the time that David had been absent from the court, 20.5, 27. 'Three days since I came out' would also account for David's hunger, and that of the young men with him. *'The vessels of the young men are holy, and the bread is in a manner common, yea, though it were sanctified this day in the vessel'*. What did David mean? Frankly, I don't know! To my mind, the two most plausible interpretations of the first expression - *'The vessels of the young men are holy'* - are:

(i) The 'vessels' refer to the scrips or utensils into which the young men would put the bread. David accepted that, if these 'vessels' had been for any reason ceremonially unclean, they would have had the effect of defiling the bread.²¹ But David assured Ahimelech that, although their journey had not been for a specifically religious purpose, their 'vessels' had remained free from any defilement (such as human or animal blood, Lev. 11.32; Num. 19.11) and that they were therefore fit to carry the 'hallowed bread'.

(ii) The 'vessels' refer to the bodies of the young men. That is, David was simply reinforcing the point that the young men had been away from women for several days.

I think the two most plausible interpretations of the second expression - *'the bread is in a manner common, yea, though it were sanctified this day in the vessel'* are:

(a) That, though Ahimelech's action in giving the bread to David and his men may in itself be profane (common') in that the bread is no longer devoted to any sacred purpose - such as feeding God's priests - that action will itself be sanctified by Ahimelech in that he has the authority to sanction it because of the exceptional circumstances.

(b) That the shewbread is, in a sense, now 'common' - that is, it is now effectively already ordinary bread. This because other - fresh - bread has now been substituted for it on the table of shewbread, and the religious use of the old bread is now over. Note the AV margin, 'especially when this day there is other sanctified in the vessel'.

Whatever the details, David was clearly concerned to assure Ahimelech that there was no ceremonial impediment to stop him giving the old shewbread to David and his men.

Verse 6. *'The priest gave him hallowed bread'*. On the face of it, the words of our Lord recorded in Mark 2 claim that it was Abiathar, rather than Ahimelech, who was high priest at the time; 'Have ye never read what David did, when he had need, and was an hungred, he, and they that were with him? How he went into the house of God in the days of Abiathar the high priest, and did eat the shewbread', Mark 2.25-26. Literally translated, the AV phrase 'in the days of Abiathar' reads, 'on ('επι) Abiathar'. The most likely interpretation of the phrase is 'in the account of Abiathar' - as with 'in the account of ('επι) the Bush', Mark 12.26 lit. That is, because Abiathar was more noteworthy than Ahimelech in terms of David's history (see 1 Sam. 22-30; 2 Sam. 15-20 and 1 Kings 1-4), the section of scripture which dealt with David's visit to Nob was known by his name. See JND's translation of Mark 2.26, 'how he entered into the house of God, in [the section of] Abiathar [the] high priest'.²²

Verse 7 The villain : 'A certain man ... there that day ... Doeg'

'Now a certain man of the servants of Saul was there that day ... and his name was Doeg, an Edomite'. The reader's attention is directed - just for a brief moment - to one spectator. Even without any knowledge of the sequel in chapter 22, the words 'of the servants of Saul ... an Edomite' are enough to make the reader wince. Ahimelech, having accepted David's version of how things stood between him and Saul, saw no cause for alarm in the presence of one of Saul's chief officer's. Why should he? But David - who knows that his story has been one pack of lies from start to finish - does! As soon as David spotted Doeg, the red light began to flash. The presence of Doeg boded only ill. As David admitted to Abiathar after 'the Nob massacre', 'I knew it that day, when Doeg the Edomite was there, that he would surely tell Saul!²³

'Detained before the Lord'. Doeg was required to remain in the sanctuary on account of some religious obligation. It is possible that Doeg, as a descendant of Esau, was seeking admission to Israel as a proselyte, for this was admissible for Edomite children of the third generation.²⁴ Or he may have there in connection with a vow or matter of ceremonial purification. We aren't told and so we don't know. All we know is that he 'was there that day'. And what, I wonder were the chances of Doeg being 'there' on 'that day'? Is this an instance of what has been called, 'the devil's providence'? But ultimately it is the Most High who rules - and His own time He would bring about the fulfillment of His word to Eli back in chapters 2 and 3, 2.27-31; 3.11-18, and He would over-rule Doeg's wickedness to do it. But for more on that we must wait until the next chapter.

'The chiefest of the herdmen that belonged to Saul'. Doeg's official rank was that of overseer of Saul's herdsmen (or possibly 'shepherds' - the same word used to describe David as a keeper of his father's sheep, 16.11; 17.15,34). It may be that Doeg had come over to Saul during his wars with Edom, 14.47. If so, Doeg had risen quickly to a position of considerable importance in what was a predominantly pastoral country. We gather from the psalm which David later wrote about Doeg that he was a man of great wealth; 'Lo, this is the man that made not God his strength; but trusted in the abundance of his riches', Psa. 52.7.

Verses 8-9 Any weapon? 'Under thine hand ... spear or sword?', v.8. Only one special sword

Verse 8. *'Is there not here under thine hand spear or sword?'* Perhaps Doeg's presence there underlined in David's mind just how defenseless he was. It is clear that he would need *protection* as well as *provision*. And so David

craved a second favour of Ahimelech. His wide-ranging request - 'spear or sword' - indicates that David was unaware that Goliath's sword was then at Nob. Either the Philistine's sword had not been deposited along with the rest of his armour in David's tent, 17.54, or David had since lost track of it.

David's question, 'Is there not here under thine hand ...?' is mirrored by his following statement, 'For I have not taken either sword or weapons in my hand ...', lit. That is, David hopes that Ahimelech has to hand what he doesn't! 'The king's business required haste'. And, considering what 'the king's business' really was at that moment (trying to kill David!), David wasn't joking! Saul's present 'business' certainly required David to make haste, but not in the way in which David meant Ahimelech to understand it!

Verse 9. 'The priest said, The sword of Goliath the Philistine, whom thou slewest in the valley of Elah, behold, it is here'. The priesthood had no need for weapons. There was therefore just one sword on the premises, 'the sword of Goliath the Philistine'. In his words, 'whom thou slewest', Ahimelech was readily acknowledging David's right to the sword.

'Wrapped in a cloth behind the ephod'. The sword was behind the ephod – hung in a secure place within the tabernacle – dedicated no doubt as a memorial and trophy of the great victory God had earlier given Israel through David.

'There is none like that; give it me'. Speaking of Goliath's sword, Ahimelech had said, 'If thou wilt take *that* ... there is no other save *that* here'. David's response is, 'There is none like *that*'. As far as he was concerned, he could have asked for – and been given – nothing better. Quite obviously Goliath's sword was not of the monstrous proportions of his other armour and weaponry – but neither was it just any sword. It was doubtless made of the very best iron, as perfect a sword as any Philistine blacksmith could make and temper. (Can you imagine any blacksmith venturing to offer some piece of sub-standard workmanship to a ten-foot mountain of muscle!)

David was no doubt right – 'there is none like that'. This was no ordinary sword. I guess there was none better in the ancient world. And yet, I know of another 'sword' do to speak – of that which is 'living and powerful, sharper than any two-edged sword'. I refer, of course, to 'the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God', Eph. 6.17; Heb. 4.12. And with *that* 'sword' in mind, I say with David, 'There is none like *that*. give it me'!

I cannot help wondering what thoughts raced through David's mind when he first gripped the hilt of Goliath's sword. Surely not only that it felt a good, well-made weapon. I am sure the memories came flooding back. And memories of what? Of how he had held that sword once before. Of how it had then been 'Goliath for the chop!' Of how he had brought down the mighty Philistine champion – not with lies and half-truths – but with a bold confidence in the living God, the Lord of hosts – with a calm trust which gave him the courage to do what he knew to be right and to leave the consequences with God. Then why, oh why, David, must you now flee to the land of God's enemies?

Verses 10-15 David the deceiver - his 'feigned madness'. 'David ... was ... afraid', v.12

Verses 10-11. 'David arose, and fled that day for fear of Saul, and went to Achish the king of Gath'.

'Achish the king of Gath'. In the title of Psalm 34, Achish is called '(the) Abimelech' (meaning 'the divine king (*melech*) is my father (*'abî*)'). 'The Abimelech' was almost certainly a Philistine royal title²⁵, in the same way that 'Pharaoh' was a title of the Egyptian kings.²⁶ That is, Abimelech was the man's *title*, and Achish his *name*.

David may well have travelled the road to Gath before. After he had defeated Goliath, Israel had pursued the Philistines, slaughtering them 'even unto Gath', 17.52. It is at least possible that David had had been among the conquering forces that day. If so, how things have changed for him. Now, he approaches Gath as a refugee seeking asylum.

But why seek shelter in Gath of all places? To head for somewhere else in the land of the Philistines – Israel's enemies – would have been bad enough – but Gath! Surely Gath was the very city from which Goliath had come, 17.4. No doubt, apart from the likely presence in Gath of Goliath's own family, he had been a great hero there – 'local boy makes good' and all that. Surely Gath should have been – quite literally – the very last place on earth to which David would head – the more so as he was now carrying the very sword with which he had severed 'the local boy's' head.

We have no way of knowing how long had elapsed since David's exploit in the valley of Elah. It may well have been several years. Did David then hope that the Philistines would fail to recognize him after this time? Probably not. For much of the intervening period, David had maintained a high profile in Israel's conflict with the Philistines, 18.13-14, 30; 19.8. Leaving aside the 'foreskins' incident – which had been a national disgrace to the Philistines and which they were unlikely to forget or forgive for a very long time – in the last recorded conflict between Israel and the Philistines, David had led Israel against the Philistines, 'and slew them with a great slaughter, and they fled from him', 19.8. David would have been as conspicuous in the court of Achish as Saddam Hussein in the Pentagon!

Then why choose to go there? Well, it does seem that the city of Gath was a convenient and an attractive place of refuge for any fleeing Israelites. Indeed, David himself would head there again in a later moment of despondency and weak faith, 27.1-2. And, later again, two of Shimei's servants would flee there from their master; 'At the end of three years, that two of the servants of Shimei ran away unto Achish son of Maachah king of Gath. And they told Shimei, saying, Behold, thy servants be in Gath', 1 Kings 2.39.²⁷ But David's unsavoury reputation – in Gath of all places – must surely have outweighed by far any considerations of convenience.

Did then David deliberately choose to change his address to Gath because he knew that he *would* be recognized? In his desperation, did he pin his hopes on being welcomed by the Philistines as a defector? Would they not hail Israel's most famous general's defection to them as a notable triumph – and receive him gladly?

But, if that was David's hope, he was to be badly disappointed! He was soon clapped in irons! It was Death Row for David!

'The servants of Achish said unto him, Is not this David the king of the land?' As expected, David was instantly recognised. The royal title which the Philistines gave him was not as surprising as might first appear. Technically, of course, Saul was still king – and would be for some time yet. But David's exploits had already thrown Saul into the shade – in Philistia as well as in Israel. It had been David, and not Saul, who had ventured down into the valley of Elah to do battle with their 'indestructible' champion – and it had been David, and not Saul, who had slain Goliath – as celebrated by the famous song which they all knew by heart! And it had been David, and not Saul, who had subsequently distinguished himself in the continuing hostilities between the two nations. To the Philistines, while Saul may still officially retain the title of 'king of the land', it was David who was already effectively that – and his receiving the formal title was only a matter of time.

The Philistines of Gath understood David's destiny better than Saul did! And in a sense better than David did at this point. In one sense, they have become the Lord's prophets to confirm His word to Samuel concerning David, 'I have provided me a king', 16.1. In a similar vein to Caiaphas in John 11, they spoke 'not of' themselves – they spoke beyond themselves.²⁸

But no doubt, as far as David was concerned at the time, coming from whom it did and where it did, the title had a rather nasty and ominous ring about it!

'Did they not sing one to another of him in dances, saying, Saul hath slain his thousands, and David his ten thousands?' Clearly the 'song and dance' which the women of Israel had made about David following his victory at Elah had become public knowledge in Gath. Even the officials in the court of Achish knew the lyrics of the popular ditty. And what was it that had occasioned the song? Why, only the spectacular – and altogether unexpected – defeat which *they* had suffered! 'And who, pray, O King, were the "ten thousands" who this legendary David was responsible for slaying? Who? Philistines – that's who! Ask their widows!'

Verse 12. *'David laid up these words in his heart, and was sore afraid of Achish the king of Gath.'* And David had every reason to be afraid. It is clear that he was immediately 'arrested'. This is the obvious implication of the words 'in their hands', v.13, and is confirmed by the title of Psalm 56, which speaks of the occasion 'when the Philistines took him' ('seized him', 'caught hold of him'²⁹) in Gath'.

What a predicament for David. In fleeing from Saul to Achish, he had jumped out of the frying pan right into the fire! Perhaps we could say, in biblical language, it was 'as if a man did flee from a lion, and a bear met him' – to quote Amos's graphic sermon illustration, Amos 5.19.

What, if anything, could David now do? Well, there were two things he could do – and he did both! Our chapter speaks of the one, and two of his psalms speak of the other. First, let's look at our chapter.

Verse 13. *'He changed his behaviour'³⁰ before them, and feigned himself mad in their hands.'* It was a brilliant idea of David's to pretend to be mentally ill – and that for at least three reasons.

First, it was entirely consistent with his surprising presence at Gath. Surely the Philistines must have wondered about David's sanity when first he turned up there of all places. Would anyone with David's military record have presented himself there if he was in his right mind? And so David's 'performance' fitted in extremely well with this earlier 'act of madness'.

Second, David had spent many hours at close quarters with Saul, at times when Saul was 'troubled' by the 'spirit of distress'. David had had every opportunity to witness at first hand the symptoms of madness and frenzy during Saul's outbursts. David no doubt felt that he was well placed to have a go at counterfeiting those symptoms.

Third, David would have been aware of the 'reverence' which the Philistines – along with all other nations in the Ancient Near East – had for mad people. Because insanity was believed to be an affliction of the gods, imbeciles were not to be harmed. This was partly because it was thought that they had already suffered enough, and partly because, having lost their reason, they were thought to be open to supernatural influences, and were therefore treated as 'sacred' and 'taboo'.³¹ David knew therefore that, if his theatrics were sufficiently convincing, he should be safe.

So David was no fool when he decided to act the madman! Yes, it meant that he would have to humiliate himself before Achish and his officials – but better disgraced than dead!

'Scrabbled on the doors of the gate.' It is not clear which gate, but the Hebrew word is used very frequently for the 'gate' of a city; for example, 'the gates of Ekron', 17.52. I note that Samson 'took the doors of the gate' of Gaza (yet another of the Philistines' five principal cities) and carried them off, Jud. 16.3! David didn't have the strength – or opportunity – to walk off with the doors of the gate of Gath, but he did take the opportunity to 'scramble' ('scribble' or 'scratch') on them.³²

'Let his spittle fall down upon his beard.' The 'saliva on the beard act' was especially convincing, because in the Ancient Near East any indignity to the beard was considered an intolerable insult.³³ Only a man who wasn't right in the head would dream of doing something which adversely affected his *own* beard.

And yet there was something particularly sad in seeing God's 'anointed' king with his spittle running down his beard. Did David think at the time – as he did when he later wrote Psalm 133 – of the precious anointing oil which had once run down upon the beard of God's 'anointed' priest, Aaron, Psa. 133.2. What a contrast!

Verse 14. *'Then said Achish unto his servants, Lo, ye see the man is mad.'* David's *début* as an actor was a great success. The nonsense graffiti and messy beard had Achish completely fooled. Perhaps tapping the side of his head, the king of Gath declared David certifiable.

'Wherefore then have ye brought him to me?' As if to say, 'What do you think this is? A mental asylum?'

Verse 15. *'Have I need of mad men, that ye have brought this fellow to play'³⁴ the mad man in my presence?'* With not a little humour, Achish declared that he had more than enough madmen around him already – that he already had his full quota – and could do without another, thank you very much! It was the king's way of saying that he *did not* want to see David again. And so David, having received 'the left foot of fellowship' from Achish, was run out of

town. Achish 'drove him away, and he went' (literal translation of the title of Psa. 34) – presumably fast! – and 'escaped to the cave Adullam', 1 Sam. 22.1.

It was, no doubt, a much relieved David who headed back towards the land of Israel that day. But we know that David was more than relieved! When commenting on v.12, we noted that there were two things which David could do when the Philistines seized him – and that he did both. 1 Sam. 21.13 told us of the one; it is left to two of David's psalms (written concerning this very incident) to tell us of the other. And the other thing was by far the sanest thing David could do in the circumstances – and indeed in any circumstances – he could pray!

The two psalms (Psa. 56 and Psa. 34) give us an insight into David's spiritual inner feelings and exercises at the time. Both psalms were probably written after David reached a place of safety – quite likely the cave of Adullam, 22.1. In Psa. 56, David largely gives voice to his feelings *in* his hour of danger, whereas, in Psa. 34, he expresses his feelings *when he had been delivered* from it. In Psa. 56 David pleads with God to save him; in Psa. 34 he blesses God that He had saved him.³⁵

(a) Psa. 56 articulates David's heart cries and assertions of trust in God:³⁶

'Be merciful unto me, O God: for man would swallow me up', v.1.

'What time I am afraid, I will trust in thee', v.3. Twice David says, *'In God have I put my trust: I will not be afraid what man can do unto me', vv.4, 11.* (Contrast David's earlier fears, when he had 'fled that day for fear of Saul ... and was sore afraid of Achish', 1 Sam. 21.10, 12.)

'Put thou my tears into thy bottle', v.8. (We read nothing of David's tears in 1 Sam. 21. But clearly he had wept, and had asked that God 'would remember them, preserving them as men preserved water in a skin-bottle, every drop treasured ... What a tender thought is this! Tears preserved in the memory of God! ... He will never forget the ... sufferings of his saints'.³⁷)

'When I cry unto thee, then shall mine enemies turn back: this I know; for God is for me', v.9. (The word 'cry' reveals something of the earnestness and intensity of David's prayer at the time. His declaration, 'God is for me', was in fact the key to everything. David proved, as have God's people through the ages, that 'if God be *for us*, who can be against us', Rom. 8.31.)

(b) Psa. 34 is very much David's song of deliverance:

'I sought the Lord, and he heard me, and delivered me from all my fears', v.4.

'The angel of the Lord encampeth round about them that fear him, and delivereth them', v.7.

'The righteous cry, and the Lord heareth, and delivereth them out of all their troubles', v.17.

'Many are the afflictions of the righteous: but the Lord delivereth him out of them all', v.19.

'This poor man cried, and the Lord heard him, and saved him out of all his troubles', v.6.³⁸

Yes, of course, when he 'feigned himself mad', David was doing everything he could practically to save himself. But David clearly saw nothing inconsistent with this in also simultaneously calling out God, in continuing trust, to save him. And so, when he wrote Psa. 34, David fully recognised that, though in the event the Lord had chosen to use his own effort and tactic to do so, ultimately it was the Lord who had delivered him. And it was for this reason that he began Psa. 34 with the beautiful words: 'I will bless the Lord at all times; His praise shall continually be in my mouth ... Oh, magnify the Lord with me, and let us exalt His name together', vv.1, 3.

End-notes

¹ In the order in which he broke them, the 10th (in coveting his neighbour's wife), the 7th (in committing adultery with her), and the 6th (in murdering one of his most loyal warriors to cover up his other sins).

² From 'Along the Road'.

³ The location of Gath has not been established with any certainty. As far as I am aware, most scholars favour its identification with Tell es-Safi, ten miles southeast of Ekron and ten miles east of Ashdod. It is this site which is shown on the map which accompanies these notes. (See, for instance, 'The Biblical World', ed. Charles F. Pfeiffer, Baker Book House.)

⁴ See the description of Sennacherib's march in Isa. 10.28-32. Nob was a day's march south of Geba on the road to Jerusalem, and within sight of the city. It lay between Anathoth and Jerusalem.

⁵ See also Annex A to chapter 22.

⁶ See the note to 22.19. It seems that the tabernacle may have been located at Mizpah and Gilgal between the time it was at Shiloh and the time it was at Nob; see 7.9-10 and 10.8; 13.8-10; 15.10-15 respectively.

⁷ The ark of the covenant was no longer in the tabernacle. The ark was situated in the house of Abinadab at Kirjath-jearim, 1 Sam. 7.1-2 – and stayed there until David brought it up to Jerusalem, 2 Sam. 6.1-4; 1 Chron. 13.5-8. (Note that the AV rendering 'that/which was in Gibeah' in 2 Sam. 6.3-4 is wrong – it should be translated 'which was in/on the hill'. Although there was one occasion when Saul did have the ark brought to him when at Migron which was on the outskirts of Gibeah, 14.1,18. He didn't actually go through with enquiring at the ark, 14.19 – nor does it seem that he ever successfully enquired of it; 'Saul asked counsel of God ... but he answered him not that day', 1 Sam. 14.37; 'David said unto all the congregation of Israel ... let us bring again the ark of our God to us: for we enquired not at it in the days of Saul', 1 Chron. 13.3.)

⁸ For information about the ephod with its Urim and Thummim stones, see the note to 23.6.

⁹ But it strikes me as extremely unlikely that, if Ahimelech had enquired of the Lord for David, the Lord would have directed David to go to Achish! For further consideration, see the note to 22.10.

¹⁰ Oh, that I had a similar passion for God's house today, 1 Tim. 3.15, and the presence of God there!

¹¹ We read earlier of 'Ahiah (better 'Ahijah'), the son of Ahitub' as 'the priest', 14.3,18-19. It is possible that Ahijah and Ahimelech (also spoken of also as 'the son of Ahitub', 22.9, 11, 12, 22) were one and the same. ('*Melech*' ('the divine king') may have been substituted for the divine name ('*Jah*' - i.e. 'Jehovah') in ordinary conversation. That is 'Ahi-jah' ('brother of the Lord') became 'Ahi-melech' ('brother of the divine King'.) But it is also possible that Ahimelech was Ahijah's brother, who had succeeded him to the priesthood.

¹² Dr. Constable.

¹³ The table of shewbread was made of acacia wood, overlaid with gold. It was about three feet long, eighteen inches wide, and two feet three inches high, Exod. 25.23-30. The form of the table in use in Herod's temple some 1,000 years later is preserved in a sculpture on the 'Arch of Titus' at Rome.

¹⁴ See Exod 25.30; 35.13; 39.36; 40.23; Lev 24.5-8; 1 Kings 7.48 // 2 Chron. 4.19. 'The 'table' was an emblem of fellowship. The loaves picture the Lord Jesus as the food of heaven, he on whom God feasted with delight', Andrew Bonar, '*Leviticus*', Banner of Truth, page 432. The consistently fine flour – with nothing coarse or inferior – suggests the perfections of Christ. It is significant that there was no leaven in these loaves! (Contrast the 'wave loaves of the Feast of Pentecost, Lev. 23.17.) The flour had been ground in the mill and was then 'baked in a fierce or quick oven', C.W.Slemming, '*Made according to Pattern*', H. E. Walter, 1938. So our Lord passed through both the mill of suffering and the fierce oven of Calvary. When the priests feasted on the twelve loaves of shewbread they did so as the representatives of all twelve tribes of Israel – there was one loaf for each tribe – 'for each name on his breastplate the high priest has a full supply', Bonar, page 433. Each loaf was of equal size and weight – suggesting the sufficiency of Christ for all His believing people.

¹⁵ The Lord wants our fellowship with Him, our time in His 'Presence' to be fresh. He isn't satisfied with stale and 'mouldy' worship from His people.

¹⁶ Lev. 24.9 says only that the shewbread was to be eaten only by the priests. But the Lord Jesus said, Matt. 12.4, that it was not lawful for David and others to eat it. This seems to establish the principle that, if God's word clearly says what can be done, it automatically rules out other things as unlawful.

¹⁷ F.F. Bruce, '*The Hard Sayings of Jesus*', InterVarsity, 1983, page 33. 'We acknowledge the same priority today. Suppose you pass a house that is on fire. You stop, run up to the front door, bang on the door, and ring the doorbell. You look in the window and see someone lying on the floor. You then kick in the door and drag the unconscious person outside to safety. Even though breaking into someone else's house is a criminal offence, the law will not prosecute you since you saved that person's life', Dr. Constable.

¹⁸ And we note that God hadn't actually said, 'Under all conditions, and with no exceptions, only the priests are to eat the old shewbread'.

¹⁹ There is no suggestion that David was at the point of starvation – any more than Jesus' disciples were.

²⁰ See, for example, 'if any man's seed of copulation (semen) go out from him, then he shall wash all his flesh in water, and be unclean until the even', Lev. 15.16.

²¹ Compare Haggai 2.13. Ceremonial uncleanness is contagious. See too Lev. 22.4-6; Num.19.11-16.

²² See also JND's comments in his Collected Writings, Vol. 13, pages 181 and 199, and John W. Wenham, 'Mark 2.26', JTS 1 [1950]: 156. Some adhere to the AV rendering. They point out that it is not actually said that Abiathar

was high priest at the time and interpret the Lord's words as simply referring to the life-time of Abiathar (who later became, and was known as, the high priest), and not to the term of his holding the office of high priest.

²³ Compare Jonah's premonition, 'O Lord, was not this my saying, when I was yet in my country? Therefore I fled before unto Tarshish: for I knew that thou art a gracious God, and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repentest thee of the evil', Jonah 4.1-2.

²⁴ 'Thou shalt not abhor an Edomite; for he is thy brother ... the children that are begotten ... shall enter into the congregation of the Lord in their third generation', Deut. 23.7-8. (The normal rules were very different for Moabites, such as David's great grandmother, vv.3-6!)

²⁵ Compare Gen 20.2-18; 21.22-32; 26.1-16, 26.

²⁶ Compare 'Caesar' among the Romans.

²⁷ It is lovely to contrast the crossing of the Kidron by Shimei's servants and the crossing of the Kidron by David's 'Son'! Shimei's servants fled 'over the brook Kidron' to escape from bondage, 1 Kings 2.37. My Lord didn't flee 'over the brook Kidron' - He went 'over the brook Kidron' to confront His foes, John 18.1-5 - and, by way of suffering and death, to free me from bondage!

²⁸ Caiaphas said to the Council, 'Ye know nothing at all, Nor consider that it is expedient for us, that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation perish not. This spake he not of himself: but being high priest that year, he prophesied that Jesus should die for that nation', John 11.50-51.

²⁹ See, for example, its use in describing how 'the Philistines took' Samson and put out his eyes, Judg. 16.21. Also of the 'ram caught in a thicket', Gen. 22.13.

³⁰ 'Changed his behaviour' is literally, 'changed his taste'. (The word is translated 'taste', for example, in Exod. 16.31; Num. 11.8; and Job 6.6.) David acted 'as if he had lost the power to distinguish between objects'.

³¹ 'It is well known that among oriental, as among most semi-civilized nations, madmen were looked upon with a kind of reverence, as possessed of a quasi-sacred character. This arises partly no doubt from the feeling, that one, on whom God's hand is laid heavily, should be safe from all other harm; but partly also from the belief that the loss of reason and self-control opened the mind to supernatural influence, and gave it therefore a supernatural sacredness', Smith's Revised Bible Dictionary.

This belief was encouraged by animated expressions of religious fervour on the part of many religious personnel. See, for example, the antics of the priests of Baal when they 'leaped upon the altar which was made ... they cried aloud, and cut themselves after their manner with knives and lancets, till the blood gushed out upon them', 1Kings 18.26-28. Compare the application of the term 'this mad fellow' to one of the Lord's prophets in 2 Kings 9; 'Elisha the prophet called one of the children of the prophets, and said unto him, Gird up thy loins, and take this box of oil in thine hand, and go to Ramothgilead: And when thou comest thither, look out there Jehu the son of Jehoshaphat the son of Nimshi, and go in, and make him arise up from among his brethren, and carry him to an inner chamber; Then take the box of oil, and pour it on his head, and say, Thus saith the Lord, I have anointed thee king over Israel. ... he opened the door, and fled. Then Jehu came forth to the servants of his lord: and one said unto him, Is all well? Wherefore came *this mad fellow* to thee?', 2 Kings 9.1-11. Again, see the Lord's word to Shemaiah; 'Thou hast sent letters in thy name unto all the people that are at Jerusalem, and to Zephaniah the son of Maaseiah the priest, and to all the priests, saying, The Lord hath made thee priest in the stead of Jehoiada the priest, that ye should be officers in the house of the Lord, for every man that is mad, and maketh himself a prophet, that thou shouldest put him in prison, and in the stocks', Jer. 29.25-26. It seems that 'Hosea was the butt of similar innuendoes for he too was referred to as mad', TWOT, Vol.2, page 905 (see Hos. 9.7). Compare also the New Testament reference, 'If the whole church ... speak with tongues ... will they not say that yer are mad', 1 Cor. 14.23.

³² The Septuagint uses a word (*τυμπανιζω*) which means 'to beat as a drum' or 'to beat with a stick'.

³³ See 2 Sam. 10.1-6.

³⁴ It is a good thing that Achish wasn't able to see the AV translation of his words in v.15, 'brought this fellow to play the madman' (or the AV margin of his words in v.14 for that matter), or he might have guessed that it was all an act! (The Hebrew word means simply 'to show madness' or 'to be a madman'.)

³⁵ The relation of Psa. 56 'to Psa. 34 resembles that of Psa. 51 to Psa. 32', Delitzsch on the inscription to Psa. 34.

³⁶ It is possible that the musical notes which appear in the titles (the 'superscriptions') of 39 of the psalms are actually 'subscriptions' of the *preceding* psalms. (This does not affect the main titles, which do refer to the psalm to which they are currently attached.) This argument, partly based on sections of Isa. 38 and Hab. 3, is advanced by Chuck Missler at : khouse.org/articles/biblestudy/20010201-322.html.

If this so, the expression 'Al-taschith' (which features in the present titles of Psalms 57, 58, 59 and 75) is really connected to Psalms 56, 57, 58 and 74. 'Al-taschith' means, 'Do not destroy' - see AV margin and NIDOTTE, Vol. 4, page 93. It may be, of course, that the expression is no more than the name of a musical tune. But, *if* its meaning does carry significance, the words 'Do not destroy' would be particularly appropriate for Psa. 56.

³⁷ J. Flanigan, 'Psalms' in the 'What the Bible Teaches' series, John Ritchie Ltd, 2001.

³⁸ Note the four references in Psa. 34 to the 'all' (fears and troubles) from which God delivers; vv. 4, 6, 17, 19.